

# Participant Observation and Systems Theory:

## Theorizing the Ground

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**Zusammenfassung:** Ethnographen zeigen sich fasziniert durch ihre Felderfahrungen. Doch obwohl sie sich als teilnehmende Beobachter identifizieren, haben sie keine Theorie des Beobachtens entwickelt. Systemtheoretiker verfügen über eine Theorie der Beobachtung zweiter Ordnung, aber sie vermeiden Feldforschungen. In unserem Beitrag argumentieren wir, dass Systemtheorie und Ethnographie einander effektiv ergänzen können. Ausgehend vom Konzept der Selbstreferenz lässt sich das Verhältnis von Wahrnehmung, Beobachten und Verstehen begreifen, das in der Ethnographie bislang ungeklärt geblieben ist, wie wir in einer Diskussion der »dichten Beschreibung« von Clifford Geertz zeigen wollen. Als eine besondere Form des Beobachtens greift Verstehen durch die Einrechnung von Selbstreferenz über Wahrnehmung hinaus. Nur vermittelt über Selbstreferenz entstehen und erscheinen Sinn und Kultur. Als Teilnehmer müssen Ethnographen nicht nur die Ereignisse in ihrem Feld beobachten, sondern vor allem deren *Verbindungen*. Sie müssen die Selektivität beobachten, die Sinn benutzt, um zwischen aktuellen Ereignissen und ihren alternativen Möglichkeiten zu unterscheiden. Diese Beobachtungstheorie ermöglicht der Ethnographie, über die Sammlung von Erzählungen hinauszugehen und sich den etablierten Fragen, vertrauten Problemen und epistemologischen Ressourcen der Soziologie zu öffnen. Eine theoretisch informierte Ethnographie verhilft ihrerseits der systemtheoretischen Forschung, ihren Horizont über funktionale und historische Analysen hinaus zu erweitern. Durch Beobachtungen in der ethnographischen Form könnten Systemtheoretiker beobachten und erklären, wie sich soziale Praktiken in der Sozialdimension von Sinn konstituieren.

Upon the narrow horizon of methodology, observation makes an occasional appearance as an alternative to conducting interviews; as another means of data collection. Apart from this, however, the concept of observation seems to lurk in the shadows of mainstream sociology. As Max Weber might have hoped, sociology has become a discipline preoccupied with explanation and understanding. Although these twin concepts seem to dominate every discussion of sociology as a science, we assert that observation is a prerequisite for both. A sociology that fails to theoretically reflect on what it means to make and connect observations puts its own status as a scientific discipline in jeopardy.

In this paper we offer a critical assessment of ethnography, in which the methodology of observation has long played a major role. Research using participant observation has traditionally failed to theorize what it means to observe, whether as a participant-investigator or a participant-native. Our desire is to strengthen the plausibility and usefulness of ethnographic methods within the discipline by reducing this deficit. We want to encourage sociologists – systems theorists in particular – to engage in the empirical investigation of cultural practices, but with an enlightened theoretical understanding of what they can and cannot observe. Following our critique of traditional ethnography, we suggest a strategy for guiding participant observers toward questions and answers that can meaningfully contribute to sociology.

Our position is informed by social systems theory, as developed by Niklas Luhmann. While Luhmann has been criticized as a rather stodgy theorist who saw no point in observing real people, we see him as the most compelling observer of the social world. Luhmann repeatedly recommended that sociologists get out in the field to observe operations of meaning »in actu« (2001c: 235), with the expressed intention of methodically controlling their own theory building (2001b: 208). Although he certainly did not proceed in the style of the most frequently modeled ethnographers, we show below that his technique of observation is a valuable extensi-

on of qualitative sociology's classic concern for »thick description« (Geertz 1973). Luhmann's insights substantially improve our understanding of how, as Clifford Geertz, one of the most influential ethnographers argues, the members of social groups use »structures of signification« or »established codes« in order to participate in communication (1973: 9). Luhmann's theory directly responds to key methodological problems revolving around the status of ethnographers as observers. Systems theory takes it for granted that sociologists are always participants in society and that they cannot escape from their own subject matter in order to gain an impartial or unbiased perspective. This means that *sociologists are always participant observers in society*: they are natives in society. Their task is to specify the critical difference that distinguishes sociological observations from those of different types. Without attempting to market a new grand narrative that already claims to know what it will discover before it even takes a look, systems theory can help sociologists clearly anticipate and describe what they will observe both before and after they conduct fieldwork. More than that, it offers ethnographers strategic resources for participating in scientific communication about what they observe in the field.

### The Ethnographer as an Observer

As a broadly defined method for conducting empirical research on society, ethnography is presented as the art of portraying a people after observing members interact in their natural setting (Harris and Johnson 2000). In this sense, ethnography forms a unity of conducting and reporting observations. John van Maanen (1996) equates ethnography with »participant-observation,« which seems to suggest that fieldwork involves a toggling between active and passive roles. In their rejection of positivist methodology, Yvonna S. Lincoln and Egon G. Guba (1985) present ethnography as a basic form of »naturalistic inquiry«. One may imagine the fearless sociologist, hungry for knowledge, venturing out alone into the wild world beyond the university campus. Starting from the outside, our heroic figure seeks access to a special world of insiders. The expressed goal is to understand the customs, beliefs, and behaviors shared by the members of a symbolically bounded community. Whether the targeted group is a small and isolated tribe in an exotic land or a classroom in a suburban school (Fettermann 1998), the researcher »lives with and lives like« the natives (van Maanen 1996); temporarily transformed into a virtual member of the group under investigation. After learning the ropes and »finding his feet« (Geertz 1973: 13), the ethnographer emerges from the bush with »a story« to tell (Hammersley 1990).

Budding sociologists may choose from many well received texts that claim to teach the rudiments of *doing* ethnography, and we will therefore escape the task of summarizing the method as it is generally presented to students (see Agar 1996; Brewer 2001; Madison 2005). Instead, we note two significant claims that appear common within introductory works. First, ethnography is presented as *active engagement*. The researcher becomes an actor, a participant, one who does the things he or she claims to have observed members doing. Actions are performed in the field, and then they are described for those who were not able to join in the practices: »I had loads of fun, wish you could have been here, but let me tell you the story of what I saw and did with the natives«. Having engaged in the action creates a possibility for the researcher to personally claim legitimacy as an observer. A second universal claim is that the ethnographer embodies a unity of opposites. Like the mermaid and the centaur, the participant-observer is a creature with an identity problem. There is the schizophrenia of simultaneously observing and participating; of living with and living like a member, but also warning oneself not to become a native. The claim to legitimacy as a scientific observer is sacrificed, ethnographers warn each other, as soon as the researcher loses himself within the perspective of a participant.

The ethnographer is, indeed, an actor who performs operations in the field that others will only hear or read about. This asymmetrical situation creates some grounds for suspicion and

uncertainty. How can an audience of sociologists critically evaluate the ethnographer's story if they did not themselves participate in the action? Are there specific actions that they may assume will be taken during the course of every genuine participant-observation, a required formula of operational steps that guarantees validity? From a systems theoretical standpoint, any degree of understanding between the ethnographer and the audience may be assumed to be improbable – it should not happen (Luhmann 1991a: 25-34). Ethnographers stress how hard it can be to understand what natives mean by what they do. Why should it be any easier for sociologists to understand a particular ethnographer's report?

If sociology disciplines and conditions the expectations of both the participant observer and the audience who receives reports from the field, then we might suggest that *sociological theory* plays a vital role in establishing the parameters for evaluating and understanding ethnography. But we must be careful! Ethnographers often warn themselves that it is extremely dangerous to begin a study with any sort of theoretical orientation in mind. If one work's deductively, as it were, the native culture cannot speak with its own tender voice. Graduate students are often advised to go into the field without *any* sort of preconceived notions. Work inductively and the point of your study will simply emerge (Glaser 1992)! Why learn theory if every single study produces its own? According to Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss (1967) the use of »logico-deductive theories« is the best way to *misunderstand* one's subjects. »Grounded theory« ought to be the name of the game; as if there could be as many theories as there are ethnographies. Under such conditions, would sociology not at once forfeit any claim that it is a scientific discipline? Is one story just as good as another, so long as it has never been told before?

We believe that ethnographers must admit the need for beginning with some preconceived notions. It should be obvious that personal interests, for instance, help steer the investigator toward worthwhile groups and promising research questions. Choosing a site for fieldwork requires a distinctive openness toward multiple options, a sense for one's own preferences, and the ability to make informed selections. It is naïve to believe that ethnographers will constantly enjoy meaningful surprises, if they will only refuse to have any expectations about what they might discover. Having already participated in sociological communication, one's research interests are productively steered toward recognizable themes and ongoing debates within the discipline. Both the practical matter of securing one's viability as an academic (choose: publish or perish), as well as the communication problem of reproducing sociology within the social system of science requires one to select and frame research questions so that they gain the potential to interest a targeted audience. The ethnographer must »portray a people« in a way that is likely to reach and enlighten an identifiable group of readers for whom such portraits of people matter. Ethnographers must already ground themselves with their past observations of ethnography, if only to help themselves make connections with an audience after discovering whatever they might discover in the field.

Luhmann observed with regard to art: »A work of art without other works is as impossible as an isolated communication without further communications« (2000: 53). In the same sense, there can be no single ethnography. Ethnographers and their audience have the possibility of reaching an understanding only to the extent that they allow themselves to be conditioned by the »contingency communication« of sociology (Fuchs 2004: 22). We can say, with Paul Feyerabend (1975), that methodological orthodoxy is not worth protecting in itself and that scientific discoveries can be won by any method that works. The methodological anarchist is, nonetheless, a devout believer in science as a special way of observing and reproducing communication. When it comes to theories and methods, it is true that »anything goes!« That which goes, however, goes only by establishing a meaningful connection within the flow of scientific communication, by relating itself in agreement or disagreement with previously

identified theories and methods. No matter how many empirical observations are amassed: one cannot distinguish between truth and error without a theory.

Systems theory should have a strong appeal for those ethnographers who share an aversion for heavy handed deductive theories. As a theory, it has no end in sight; no desire to previously determine the plot of the story the ethnographer will eventually tell. The theory is closed to itself, to its own concepts and ways of relating constructs; but it does so in order to open itself to the scientific study of society. Society is emergent and reproduces itself without a teleological imperative. It possesses, as Ortega y Gasset once said of mankind, no nature or essence, only history. Sociology observes the conditions under which communication unfolds its own history, creating itself with its own operations (Luhmann 1991c: 260). Ethnographers observe the real-time moments, the occurring events, the actualizations, the empirical operations that produce this ongoing history. The ethnographer grounds his own story of society by telling it in a manner that is filled with redundancies: providing anticipated information that relieves sociological suspense. The ethnographer's story is a story because it is new and filled with variety; but it is ethnographic because it takes the form of a sociological observation. The participant-observer oscillates between observing as a participant and observing as a sociologist.

Before we can describe the form of ethnographic observation in greater detail, it is necessary to reject a traditional image of how ethnographers see what they see in the field. We may turn to Hammersley (1990), for example, to find evidence of the typical construction. The ethnographer enters the targeted site and watches members interact, occasionally speaking with them about what they feel, think, and do. In other words, the ethnographer *perceives* what actors do with reference to each other and listens to what actors say about the meaning of what they do.

The image of an ethnographer as one who collects perceptions fits nicely with an old fashioned sociological interest in the empirical observation of human subjects and social action. Nevertheless, systems theory breaks with this familiar pattern by distinguishing between perception, observation, and understanding. When it comes to perception, one may indeed observe behavior. The ethnographic observer, however, is not interested in merely observing behavior. Rather, the point is to *interpret* the meaning of behavior.

We must take the time to theorize what is meant by this kind of observation. In his highly regarded »call to arms« for interpreting culture (van Maanen 1988: 44), Clifford Geertz (1973) describes the »natives« of a targeted social group as »first-order observers«. The ethnographer writes an interpretive report as a second order observer. This distinction is also central among constructivists and those familiar with second-order cybernetics (von Foerster 1995). Geertz notes that the native is a first-order observer because it is, after all, »his culture«. In the same text, however, Geertz also suggests that »culture is public because meaning is« (Geertz 1973: 12). How does the native possess his culture, if that culture is meaningful only because it is public? With these two assertions, Geertz creates a riddle that he tries to solve by adopting the practice of »thick description,« as developed by Gilbert Ryle (1971: 480-496)<sup>1</sup>. As a second-order observer, the ethnographer's task is to describe how natives share an understanding »of interworked systems of construable signs«. (Geertz 1973: 14) For Geertz, intelligibly describing this semiotic context of sign systems and »established codes« (1973: 9) is the essence of thick description. When participant-observers succeed at thick description – that is, at observing observers – they »enlarge the universe of human dis-

1) In his own theory of observation, Gilbert Ryle (1949:228-229) emphasizes the crucial role advance expectations play in interpreting perceived sensations. We suggest that sociology can condition field-workers and those who observe their reports, culturing expectations on both sides.

course« (1973: 14). With this discourse enlargement, Geertz seems to imply that the ethnographer simply connects the established codes of natives to the non-native, all-encompassing world of human understanding. In contrast, a thin description would give a simple account of exactly what the observer perceived. Citing the analytical philosopher Ryle, Geertz discusses the problem of understanding the meaning conveyed by three different winking boys. A thin description would describe a swift contraction of the facial muscles around the right eye, as one might perceive in each case. A thick description would differentiate between the first boy who suffers from a meaningless nervous twitch, a second boy who is trying to romantically attract the attention of a girl, and a third boy who wants to tease the second by winking in comic parody. Ryle and Geertz both stress that the key to understanding social behavior lies in learning that the *same operation*, winking, can be coded with *different meanings*. They emphasize that these meanings have nothing to do with what actors think. Winks only work as winks if they are recognized as social resources, available for public use within »interworked systems of construable signs«.

Geertz's work is cited as a guiding resource in numerous ethnographies, and he certainly offers several key insights. His call for thickly describing established codes and the cultural conditions under which symbols may be construed as meaningful is easy to defend. However, his semiotic approach does not explain how established codes function as structures that *selectively* build understanding in society. His method of understanding still requires us to believe in the reality of a freely expandable »universe of human discourse« and »a natural order in human behavior« (Geertz 1973: 14). Mutual understanding is assured because, despite cultural conditioning, we all participate in human discourse. It would seem, following Geertz, that we can observe the behavior of the winker to understand what his wink means. In a frequently cited passage, Geertz supplements his notions of codes and sign systems by suggesting the metaphor of writing (and with it the operation of reading) to further elaborate on the relationship between behavior, meaning and ethnographic observation: »Doing ethnography is like trying to read (in the sense of ›construct a reading of‹) a manuscript – foreign, faded, full of ellipses, incoherencies, suspicious emendations, and tendentious commentaries, but written not in conventionalized graphs of sound but in transient examples of shaped behavior« (Geertz 1973: 10). The differences between perception, observation, and understanding appear within this metaphor as the difference between observation and reading. The writing itself, the practices which are read by the ethnographer, appears to be universally meaningful and safely harbored within the boundaries of »human understanding«. As the description of behavior thickens, it seems, interpretation becomes easier.

This is where systems theory can contribute an especially valuable insight: understanding is itself a specific form of observation – it is the observation of self-reference (Luhmann 1986: 79). No matter how thick it is, a description should not be confused with understanding. We may see a person's behavior; but we may not see the meaning of the behavior in the strict sense of seeing as a mode of perception. Understanding must refer to what is perceived, but it must also go beyond the perceptual field and presume a reference which expresses itself through perceivable signs and signals. This presumption of self-reference cannot be verified or falsified through perception of a single operation or event. Instead, it can and must be tested through further observations, which either confirm or contradict our presumptions. Ethnographers would be the first to agree that we must slowly build expectations in the field, testing what we think we understand in more than one situation. This requisite for understanding applies to persons as well as to social systems. It is exactly this connectivity between observations – observations that reciprocally support, resist, and complete each other – that Geertz seems to imply with his call for thick description. However, he overlooks that this self-referential connectivity itself differentiates a social system for observing observers. This system is *not* part of the universe of human discourse to which Geertz allu-

des: it excludes all observers who do not refer to its own special connectivity. Nonetheless, it is this differentiation that is marked by the concept of culture. Indeed, a culture is only a culture if it is different from other cultures (Baecker 2001). Geertz's idea of understanding implies that the differences between native cultures may be resolved within the universe of human discourse. This idea may have some merit from an aesthetic or moral vantage point, but it does not contribute to a strategy for conducting ethnographic observation and understanding. We argue that it depreciates the value of culture. Systems theory replaces this assumption of a final, all-encompassing unity – the happy ending of universal understanding – with the idea that there are social systems which may be observed, but only when one participates in their observations. As Stephan Fuchs puts it: every observation is a cultured observation (Fuchs 2001: 339). Without consideration of the self-reference of culture, there can be no meaning making. How does this argument relate to ethnography and research methodology?

We cannot perceive, but we can observe three boys winking and decide that the three winks have three different meanings. Understanding the winks requires cultured observers who have been previously prepared (cultured!) by communication. Communication makes its own connections in the flow of real time, establishing its own meanings beyond what can be perceived in any given instant. To observe and understand a communicative event, one must be familiar with the communication that preceded it, with the relevant themes and the possible meanings participants have already publicly constructed and conditioned themselves to remember (Luhmann 1995b: 115-121). To observe in the form of understanding, the ethnographer must gain access to the memory of a social system, to its own imaginary history. Culture is for a social system as memory is for a psychic system (Luhmann 1997: 586-94). It provides a history that supplements each selective empirical operation with meaning. First and second-order observers, natives and ethnographers, both participate in society only by learning how to assimilate and accommodate their selective understanding to the history of the social system they are observing. Participants and ethnographers are both participant-observers, struggling to inform their conscious understanding with what they can and cannot perceive in society.<sup>2</sup> Observation is the form that unifies natives, ethnographers, and their audience of readers. It is the self-reference of ethnographic understanding that processes the other-reference of natives, recasting native observations as sociological observations.

## Form, Paradox, and Meaning

We can more clearly appreciate the relationship between perception, observation, and understanding by making reference to the distinction between medium and form, as used by Luhmann in his theory of observation (Luhmann 2001c: 231; 2000: 102-131). His approach to observation is especially indebted to the pioneering work of two unusually creative thinkers, Fritz Heider (1959) and George Spencer Brown (1979). From the Austrian psychologist Heider, Luhmann takes a theory of perception that distinguishes between medium and form and loose and strict couplings. A particular form emerges from a medium, a substrate that could have taken on a different form under different conditions. Social systems build themselves by observing the differences between the loose couplings that are readily made available by a medium and the strict couplings that may temporarily take on fixed form. For instance, we hear words when our lover whispers (but our ears only register noise). We see particular letters on the page of a book using the medium of light (but our eyes only register light). Wri-

2) Describing how an observer may understand another's behavior, Gilbert Ryle (1949: 54) writes: »You learn as you proceed, and I too learn as you proceed. The intelligent performer operates critically, the intelligent spectator follows critically. Roughly, execution and understanding are merely different exercises of knowledge of the tricks of the same trade.« The fieldworker and the native are both participant observers.



ters and readers use their eyes to recognize specific (strict) sentences formed from the (loose) medium of words. To make sense of the Braille system, blind readers train themselves to feel raised dots within a rectangular cell containing six dot positions. The ability to perceive the difference between raised and unraised dots sets up the possibility to construct a medium that offers sixty-four possible loose couplings. Using fingertips, a cultured observer may feel the difference within the medium (raised/unraised) that makes an *informative* difference by representing a recognizable strict coupling. One who uses Braille produces meaning by observing the difference between dots that are raised (the actual) and dots that could have been raised but were not (the possible). Those who use the Braille system must assimilate and accommodate themselves to its self-reference. Everyone participating in the system (as outsiders!) must allow Braille to interpenetrate and coordinate their expectations. Much like language, Braille makes understanding possible by supplying a symbolically generalized medium that augments or substitutes what participants actually perceive. Systems theory depends on Heider's insights to explain the difference between perception and understanding.

As Gilbert Ryle observed (1971: 483), »A boy who cannot wink cannot parody a wink«. It is possible to construe a wink with meaning precisely because the form is not the medium. To gain meaning, the form must be related to other possible forms available within a medium that were not perceived. Because he cannot stop himself, the poor kid with the nervously twitching eye will never be able to wink. Observers learn to construct meaning by separating form and medium, controlling the difference by *enacting* culture. Ethnographers take on the challenge of explaining how specifically meaningful forms can be empirically produced or enacted within a generally irritating – and thus perceptible – medium. Communication media reach across the operational closure of human minds, irritating nerves in specific ways and thereby allowing participants to inform themselves about meaning. Heinz von Foerster (1960) suggested this with his principle of »order from noise«. With Luhmann, we read (1995c: 142), »Coded events operate as information in the communication process, uncoded ones as disturbance (noise)«. Elsewhere, Luhmann maintains: »Without ›noise,‹ no system« (1995c: 116). As humans, we may thickly describe the noise we perceive without ever understanding the self-referential codes of the system in which natives participate. Being human does not guarantee the success of ethnography.

At a later stage in his career, Luhmann discovered the work of George Spencer Brown, an enigmatic philosopher of mathematics. After the mid-1980's, nearly every one of Luhmann's publications cites Spencer Brown's theory of observation. In Spencer Brown's book, *Laws of Form* (1979), we learn that every observation is an operation that requires the observer to do two things at once: draw a distinction and indicate one side or the other. Before a distinction is drawn, there is nothing to observe: no universe, no world, no meaning, no observer. For an observer, a particular form is a *unity in difference*, it is comprised of both of its sides. The difference between the system and environment is the world. The difference between knowledge and object is reality. The difference between the actual and the possible is meaning (Luhmann 2001c: 234). The drawing of such a distinction creates a two-sided form, a paradox that cannot resolve itself except by an »outer determination« that indicates a selection (Luhmann 2001b: 201). Luhmann wants to avoid ontological assumptions and essentialism, but he begins his own analysis by assuming that »there are systems« (1995c). Social systems draw their own distinctions and self-referentially determine their own selections with »pragmatic intention« (Luhmann 2001d: 246). They do this by developing strategies or operating programs for resolving the paradoxes of their forms, by preferring one side to the other.

From the observing system's vantage point, only one side of its form may be selected as a continuation of its history. For example, as a social system, the economy observes with the form pay/no pay. During an actual communicative event, the system indicates one side or the

other according to the outer determination of the market participants (are the buyer and seller in agreement?). Without engaging participants, the economy cannot resolve the paradox of its form, even though it prefers the »pay« side of its form to the »no pay« side of its environment. The economy depends on its participants to resolve its basic paradox.<sup>3</sup>

We may also illustrate the paradoxical nature of forms by referring to an imaginary social collective. Suppose we want to conduct an ethnography of a secret fraternity, a criminal gang, religious sect, or other group that is keenly aware of its own boundaries. As second-order observers, we must first imagine that this group »exists« as a first-order observer that initially creates itself from the difference between members and non-members. Every observation it ever makes will have to »re-enter« and refer back to this initial form. How does the system inform itself of this difference? Do members exchange secret handshakes? Do they wear special leather jackets? Are they supplied with identity cards? Were they inducted through a ritual procedure? There are many functionally equivalent strategies for indicating members to the exclusion of outsiders. Of all of the possibilities, which strategy is empirically actualized and therefore construed with meaning? Which operations will confirm and recursively relate back to this initial distinction?

A social system emerges from its own ongoing operations, and those operations refer back to the paradoxical form that draws a distinction between the system and its environment. Luhmann admits that his theory cannot decide which forms will work for particular systems. Again, we realize that his theory does not imply a suspicious sort of heavy handed deductive interest in predicting empirical events. Only evolution, he argues, can filter out the most viable forms, those that can stabilize themselves through repeated operations over longer periods of time (2001a: 143). With Heider's insights in mind, the ethnographer attempts to explain how systems irritate themselves with the differences required to enable meaningful indications. How does society inform itself about the status of differences that matter? How does it detect the basic distinction and locate the boundary between its loose and strict couplings? A social medium cannot develop unless observers are able to observe what other observers can observe. Thus, the natives are also bound to be second-order observers of one another. The medium is ready to take on different forms, and this is what enables participants in society to construe the meaning of what they perceive *as a selective understanding* (Luhmann 2001b: 210). Furthermore, the ethnographer attempts to explain how observers create and resolve the paradoxes they create. For example, how can sociology observe the difference between a social system and an ethnographer who claims to describe it? It can only do this by referring to itself! The social system makes a re-entry on the side of ethnography, reflecting recognizable differences and calling forth a meaningful identity according to the possibilities sociology has already prepared itself to expect as an observer.

## Sociological Ethnography: What to Expect

While developing his notion of thick description, Gilbert Ryle discusses the situation of a man lost in introspection, *le Penseur*, who appears to be talking to himself in order to solve some intellectual quandary (1971: 487). Ryle suggests that we might observe the man testing out the sounds of his ideas in terms of their success or failure, letting his imagination speak in an experimental manner. He proposes hypothesis after hypothesis, disappointing himself again and again. Much of what he hears himself say fails to meet the test of his own reason; as if, by thinking and muttering, he could control the quality of his own thoughts. »This connects to what I have already accepted as reasonable«, he seems to tell himself, »but that

3) It is important to generalize this point: every social system needs participants to resolve the paradoxes of its forms. In participant observation the interests of systems theory and ethnography converge.



doesn't«. Ryle compares his thinker to a pioneer who takes »his present paces not to get to his destination – since he does not know the way – but to find out where, if anywhere, just these paces take him« (1971: 495). The thinker, as a pioneer, lets his mind wander toward success and failure, either one of which would help him move toward his goal. His memory of past understandings is the only resource he can use to mentally separate the wheat from the chaff.

Ethnographers might creatively develop their stories in a similarly playful and experimental manner,<sup>4</sup> using sociology to guide them toward success or failure. An ethnography is successful when it establishes a recursive connection, whether negative or positive, with sociological observations made in the past. Though one might start with anything but sociology, sociology suggests its own standards for evaluating and *limiting* what it recognizes as possible forms of knowledge (see Goldenweiser 1913). Systems theory takes it for granted that knowledge does not exist outside of a system (Luhmann 2001c: 223), simply waiting patiently for a scientist to perceive it. Rather, all knowledge is produced by observers who draw their own distinctions to separate what they can use from what they cannot. Not all stories are useful for sociology. It is no coincidence that we make repeated references to the distinction between useful and useless. We want to emphasize the first-order observer's concern with remaining a viable operator; of continuing to steer self-constructed problems toward self-constructed solutions. At the second-order, the ethnographer observes the empirical practices that simulate this operative functionalism (Nassehi 2006: 457).

Observations are only possible as operations, and operations always produce and reproduce the system that operates and observes. Instead of looking for subjects and objects and symbolic interaction, the ethnographer seeks to identify a social system and to record empirical evidence that demonstrates that this system makes its own observations and invents its own boundaries as it operates. In other words, the ethnographer aims to witness the system drawing and redrawing distinctions and indicating selections. If witnessing leads to understanding, then the »other reference« of sociology emerges: that which we imagine to be the self-reference of the system. Which distinctions does the system draw, again and again, in order to reproduce itself as an observer? The system makes every one of its operations in the present, with each operation inevitably slipping away into the past. How does it stabilize its identity and self-reference from event to event? How does it limit its options to those it can recognize? A system's repeated distinctions, when recursively applied to themselves, may appear to the ethnographer as increasingly stable »eigenbehaviors« that contribute to the system's ability to steer and reproduce itself (Luhmann 1991b: 175-6; 2001e: 270).<sup>5</sup> The development of such eigenbehaviors produces a dynamic form of stability that allows the system to confront changing conditions and adapt to new situations. The current operation may meaningfully follow a preceding one, and may itself be connected to a future operation. Despite the fact that each of the system's operations can never happen a second time, its continued operations can appear as imaginary eigenbehaviors that repeat the use of the same distinctions. This dynamic stability reproduces society by permitting consciously isolated observers, natives of social collectives, to anticipate one another's conscious expectations and solve the problem of double contingency (Luhmann 1997: 332). There are no short cuts to be found in intersubjectivity, collective conscious, human discourse, or a natural order of human behavior. Natives can and must learn how to expect and understand the use of coded forms and the eigenbehaviors of their community. Through the hard work of participation in communication, ethnographers can also learn to understand the other-reference of what natives know. Observing observers necessitates participation in their redundant form of observation.

4) On the relationship between »experiential« and »experimental« ethnography, see Poewe (1996).

5) Qualitative methodologists speak of »redundancy« and »saturation« in this regard (Stake 2000: 437; Strauss & Corbin 1998:136; Bogdan & Biklen 1999: 62).

As outlined above, every observation begins with a distinction that can be described as a paradox, a unity in difference. The form of observation is functionally effective because it is not decided in advance; it requires the system to spontaneously determine selection after selection. Critically reassessing Geertz' »public codes« and »universe of human understanding,« we assume with Luhmann that »every code appears as a form; that reformulates the problem of form« (2000: 124). We also recognize that humanity cannot ensure a universe of understanding because, as Luhmann put it, only communication communicates (1995a: 37). Every form used by society is a two-sided unity that cannot solve the paradox it represents. How, then, do observers construct the vital supplements within society with which they can inform themselves and escape the uncertainty of their two-sided forms?

We must expect that an ethnographer will initially identify a first-order observer (the source of other-reference!) who will then be described in (self-referential!) sociological terms as a social system. Which system will the ethnographer observe and for what reasons? As a second-order observer, the ethnographer must explain and justify the decision of having selected a particular observer for observation, given the fact that other candidates were also available. Luhmann (2001e:278) would expect the ethnographer to have an answer for the question: why observe this system and not another? The ethnographer is therefore compelled to begin work by describing the supplement that functioned for his own disambiguation. In effect, the ethnographer must become a second-order observer of ethnography and offer a self-description of himself as a participant (compare Stocking 1983). The self-reference of sociology offers the ethnographer resources for disambiguation. As a social system, sociology emerges by connecting a sequence of empirical operations and claiming to recognize its own unity. The individual ethnographer can construct an opinion of where sociology has been, where it ought to be headed, and what sort of social research might establish future connections to science. The ethnographer might inform himself with the memory of sociology, a memory represented by the discipline's publications and one which seeks to be re-actualized by observers who recognize its relevance for their own observations and descriptions. In short, the ethnographer will find direction by participating in and being conditioned by the contingency communication of sociology's own operations. We have already criticized the notion of grounded theory; now we recommend grounding observation with the historically produced discipline of sociology. This discipline, as Michel Foucault might put it, is prepared to self-control the coincidence – the contingency – of its own discourse. This anonymous system is ready to provide every ethnographer with its own expectations: repeated themes, techniques for perceiving, measuring, describing differences, and possibilities for identifying the recurrence of truth (see Foucault 1996: 22). It has already set up the problems for which it anticipates solutions. As a discipline, sociology calibrates the expectations of both the ethnographer and those who read ethnography in a manner that increases the chances for making sense out of new stories.

When it comes to empirical research, the ethnographer should tell a story that explains how the system that was selected for observation informs itself about resolving the paradoxes of its own forms. Systems can only operate in the present, connecting what they do at the moment with what they have already done. How does a system identify itself in the present and practice continence with respect to the past? With an apparent interest in stimulating ethnomethodological research with a systems theoretical orientation, Armin Nassehi (2006: 458) suggests: »It must be empirically established, with respect to concrete settings, what is and what can be the matter at hand; how problems and solutions are related to each other *in actu* and how presences are transformed into pasts«. Fieldworkers should concentrate on identifying the forms used by observers as they operate in real social settings, clearly showing how communication continually makes available paradoxical distinctions that can be resolved by decisions that refer to self-constructed information. Social systems limit the re-

quisite variety (Ashby 1957) of the cultured observers who participate in them in two ways. First, they restrict the problem of selectivity to established forms. Second, they provide supplements and programs that help observers make a choice and escape the ambiguity of established forms (Luhmann 1997: 750-1). This second restriction conditions observers to anticipate a reciprocal perception of differences that can be understood as meaningful information; meaningful, that is, with regard to disambiguation.

## Theorizing the Ground

Ethnographies document natives engaging in cultural practices and then explain how those practices continuously involve the drawing of a self-referential distinction and the indication of one side or the other. Within vastly different social settings, ethnographers describe how they observed observers setting up their own problems of form and then solving their paradoxes by informing themselves with a supplement that refers to an order, the necessity of timing, or by differentiating observers according to distinct roles. As a methodology for observing how social systems steer themselves from operation to operation, participant observation is of instrumental value to sociological reflection. As we have suggested above, systems theory can remedy several significant weaknesses commonly found within ethnographic work. First, participant-observation studies have uniformly failed to adequately reflect on observation itself; there are many insightful discussions of how to gain access for making observations, but there is no theory of how observation works as a self-referential, self-informing operation.<sup>6</sup> Second, studies from the past tend to share an actor-centered focus that takes attention away from society as a reality *sui generis*. Systems theory asserts that the sociological gaze should be cast exclusively on social systems formed by the operation of communication. Finally, traditional ethnographies have commonly obscured the fact that natives and ethnographers are both observers who cannot operate without enacting their own cultures. There is no such thing as a universal human discourse that unites everyone in a common understanding, a truly all embracing »imaginative universe within which their acts are signs« (Geertz 1973: 14). Culture must be taken much more seriously: it divides even as it unites. As a scientific discipline, sociology has moved past explaining patterns of behavior and social order with dubious claims of a final web of intersubjectivity, natural order, or shared consciousness. The unity of social systems compels ethnographers to observe the self-reference of communication and to tell stories about how these systems empirically produce, differentiate, and unify themselves. For their part, ethnographic studies about cultured observers participating in actual social situations would contribute valuable data for systems theoretical analysis. Systems theory would benefit from an increased appreciation for the basic question that has long entertained ethnographers: how is participation in society performed?

We suggest that ethnography could benefit from using the resources of systems theory; that it could make stronger connections to the self-reference of sociology without sacrificing its central concerns for openness, reflexivity, and aversion to any »big theory« that would depreciate cultural microcosms. Systems theory makes it possible to more precisely describe the difference we want to make when using key concepts such as observation and understanding, communication and culture, and even »grounded theory«. The theory suggests meaningful ways to link such concepts back to the wider context of sociology in general. We observe the actors observing society, we watch them participate in the enactment of

6) Indeed, the concept and form of observation is often discussed and debated. However, such discussion is always restricted to the narrow confines of »methodology.« With this limitation, ethnography blindly adopts the established conventions of sociology and sacrifices the possibility of making its own contribution to a *theory* of observation.

communication, and we reflect on and report about what and how we see with reference to a theory that elegantly builds itself in a logical, transparent, step-by-step manner. Observing participants in a sociologically relevant manner requires us to refer to self-constructed moments of meaning which seem to appear and disappear – for both participants and ethnographers – within the empirical. When ethnography is informed by systems theory, two different types of observations are recursively related to each other. The first describe what has classically been attributed to what may actually be observed in the »field«. The second type of observations may be attributed to the theoretical resources available as loose couplings within the discipline of sociology. Both observations – from the *field* and from *sociology* – are recursively related within society.<sup>7</sup> As many ethnographers have already suggested in their own self-reflections, no observations can be made »from outside,« there is no safe and distanced place from which to watch the insiders. For reflecting on this position that is betwixt and between, no contemporary theory has more promise than systems theory with its construct of second order observation.

To understand the natives, ethnographers have traditionally stressed the need for gaining access, proximity, and immediate contact. Paradoxically, for systems theorists the key to understanding lies in gaining distance:

»The concepts of reference and observation, including self-reference and self-observation, are introduced with respect to the operative handling of a distinction. They imply that this distinction is posited as a difference. This positing operates as a presupposition in the system's operations, and nothing more is usually required than working with that presupposition. One wants to make some tea. The water is not yet on. Thus one must wait. The differences between tea/another drink, putting the water on/not putting the water on, having to wait/being able to drink structure the situation without it being necessary or even helpful to thematize the unity of the difference used at any one time. We need a concept for the special case of orientation to the *unity of the difference*, which we will call *distance*. In other words, systems gain distance from information (and possibly from themselves) if they make the distinctions that they use as differences accessible to themselves as a unity«. (Luhmann 1995c: 440)

To understand the social meaning of what they perceive natives doing, ethnographers must distance themselves from every operation they empirically observe. Each concrete event witnessed in the field, every single discrete social practice observed, must be referenced to an imaginary form that provides an opportunity for making meaning out of differences. From our point of view, the famous call for »grounded theory« makes sense only if we consider what would happen if theory *never* left the ground. To be tested as a scientific premise, a theory must eventually refer to observed practices. Nonetheless, sociology cannot be confused with a description of purely empirical phenomena, no matter how thick or thin. A report of »nothing but the facts« would mask the observer and miss every instance of culture. Clifford Geertz was well aware of this problem: »... What we call our data are really our own constructions of

7) A virulent debate about ethnography's participation in society may be detected in ethnography's own alleged »crisis of representation« (Berg and Fuchs 1993; van Maanen 1995; Gottowik 1997). Nonetheless, the issue has been treated as a text-production problem which »author-fieldworkers« (van Maanen 1988: 74) may solve by using alternative performance strategies (Wolff 1987; Atkinson 1990; Reichertz 1992; van Maanen 1995; Lüders 1995; Poewe 1996; and Hirschauer 2001). More or less »literary« strategies aim at the public sphere, at art and literature, and at politics (Clifford and Marcus 1986). »Scientific« strategies aim for recognition within the social subsystem of science, appealing to methodological criteria such as reliability and validity (Hammersly 1992). Consolidating these various strategies does not appear to be possible within this debate, as a theory of the unity and differentiation of society is not available and, in fact, decidedly rejected. As usual, unity is sought after with an appeal to the old concept of culture and, as is characteristic of the concept itself, no unity is found.

other people's constructions of what they and their compatriots are up to.... Most of what we need to comprehend a particular event, ritual, idea, or whatever is insinuated as background information before the thing itself is directly examined« (1973: 9). Sociology emerges only as a supplemental source of »background information« that both connects and connects itself to what can be examined on the ground. A thoroughly grounded theory would produce nothing but disconnected observations of empirical phenomena. Not even the natives can construct meaning solely on the ground, referring only to the present; that is why they condition and distance their own observations with culture. To make sense of its observations of participants, ethnography must refer to both what happens on the ground and to its own cultured expectations and self-referential observations. The natives refer to culture, the ethnographer refers to sociology. There is no meaning in the practice and no theory on the ground. The sociological problem is how to use distance to recognize theory in what can be observed in the field.

To conclude our discussion of how systems theory can inform ethnographic work, it makes sense to turn the tables and consider how ethnography might enhance the theory's ability to describe the operations of society and its social systems. One specific difference ethnography could make may be seen in its concept of participation. We have argued above that no observer may observe society from the outside; every observer participates in society or else they do not observe. For the most part, systems theoretical research tends to practice its participation almost exclusively in the form of reading: in interpreting and citing texts. These texts are carefully dated and historically situated (as in numerous studies of the semantics of modern society), or else they are analyzed according to categories or attributed functions (as in many studies of particular functional systems). Ethnography, in contrast, typically practices its participation in the form of interaction, and has developed a rewarding interest in the differences between ego and alter and in showing how that difference is handled within interactions (Luhmann 1995c: 418-422). With reference to Luhmann's heuristic discussion of three dimensions of meaning – the categorical or factual (this and the other), the temporal (before and after), and the social (ego and alter) – one could assert that ethnography has concentrated on investigating the social dimension of meaning, communication, and culture. Systems theory, in contradistinction, has focused on the factual and temporal dimensions. We must acknowledge the common sociological interest that may be found in each of these dimensions. Systems theorists should learn to more fully appreciate ethnography's playful passion for documenting the social dimension of meaning as enacted by participants in the field. It is time for ethnographers to gain a theory of observation and for systems theorists to theorize the ground.

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